A TRIPLE BILL OF SILENT MELODRAMAS FROM THE 20's WITH STUART GERMAN AT THE PIANO.

STUART GERMAN (Universal Pictures, Berlin, 1929; released by Deutsche Universal Film)
Directed by Forrest Leavell; Cameras, Charles Sturz; Scripter Billy Wilder; Sets by Gustav Knauer and Willy Schiller; Originally subtitled "Im Nebel der Groestadt"; or "In The Fog of the City"; 60 mins. Subtitled in French and Flemish.
With Eddie Polo, Gritta Ley, Maria Foreson, Robert Garrison.

Germany made relatively few "B" pictures or even programmers, so this is a rare and interesting example of a type of film that they reverted to infrequently. The Douglas Fairbanks/Richard Talmadge actioner was, however, a genre that was extremely popular in Germany, and they made many, many, silent films on a somewhat elaborate scale than this one, the best of them starring Harry Piel. Although Eddie Polo had been tremendously popular as an action and serial star in America in the late teens and early 20's, his period of peak fame was quite brief, and few of his films seem to have survived. His appeal, like that of other equally stolid personalities of the 20's, now seems a little hard to understand. Even allowing for the fact that he is well past his prime in this particular film, and his stunts are relatively tame, he still looks more like Al Jolson or Enrico Caruso (not that they looked alike, but they were similar types, and both had a rather arrogant bearing) and doesn't cut an especially dashing figure. He made 13 features in Germany between 1926 and 1930, five of them for Universal. Joe Pasternak produced two of them.

To my knowledge, none of them were released in the U.S.A., though certainly some of them made it into British release. It's possible that Universal had planned an American release (otherwise it seems unlikely that, in the case of tonight's film, they'd have bothered to send over a Hollywood director and cameraman) but found them of dubious value when talkies took over so rapidly. There were far too many American action/quickies of this type finding it tough sledding as silents in 1929/30 for it to be worth importing duplicate material with a star whose name no longer meant very much. Apart from being interesting as a Polo vehicle, and as an example of Billy Wilder's earliest scripting (he didn't really have to strain himself, but there are some typically humorous touches), "Der Teufelsreporter" is perhaps most interesting for the ways in which it parallels its American equivalent. The story is simple and direct, no more than an excuse for chase and action, but it takes place out of doors, and fascinating use is made of Berlin's city and adjacent waterways, relatively unfamiliar geographically. At the time, and to German audiences, the shots of the tourists driving around Berlin must have seemed the worst kind of padding. And in a sense they are, but they add immeasurably to the interest of the film today since so much of Berlin was destroyed in World War 2. Incidentally, the film's chief villain Robert Garrison was a player of some stature; he had worked for Dupont, Deprey and Pabst, being best remembered for his role of the South American speculator in "The Joyless Street".

"Der Teufelsreporter" is a little slow getting under way, but once it does its pace is constant; the last two-thirds of the film are virtually all chase and, in typical German melodrama fashion, include a brief visit to an insane asylum. This isn't clearly an attempt at the American idiom, and should be "The Daredevil Reporter". It doesn't really translate into German, or into French either since its French title - "Le Reporter Diabolique" - likewise loses the sense of it. Typically, a recent American biography of Billy Wilder, obviously not having seen the film, refers to it casually as a fantasy in which a reporter sells his soul to the Devil! It's interesting that Eddie Polo appears under his name, and this is even worked into a joke at one point when a psychiatrist at the asylum, believing Polo to be insane, asks him his name - and doesn't take it seriously when he is told. Curious too, that Universal would work a plug for their upcoming "All Quiet on the Western Front" into one of the titles - even though the book had been banned in Germany and the film wouldn't be too.

The French/Flemish titles are as simple and direct as the very easy-to-follow plot. However, for the record, a quick synopsis:

Eddie Polo is a far-from-star-reporter on a Berlin paper. As the film opens, he is arguing with his boss (who is just off to get married) to give him a break and a good story to cover. But he is assigned to interview a group of American girls coming in that day on the train. Their chaperone is in the pay of a Berlin gang, which plans to kidnap the girls (they are all heiresses) and hold them for ransom. Eddie misses out on the interview to a rival paper, but roes after the girls anyway. One of the girls, sensing that something is wrong, manages to slip him a note urging him to keep an eye on them. The kidnaping is pulled off however, and the two rival papers are both on the trail. By tracing a telephone call that the chaperone made from the train, Eddie is able to get a line on the gang's hideout, and from there trails them to an island hideaway. With the police following him, he is able to effect a rescue just before the distraught millionaire fathers pay up the ransom.

FIVE MINUTE INTERMISSION

THE RAINBOW TRAIL (Fox, 1925) Directed by Lynn Reynolds; adapted by Reynolds from the novel by Cine Grey, a sequel to "Riders of the Purple Sage"; Cameras, Dan Clarke 60 mins.

"The Rainbow Trail" is a sequel with a vengeance, automatically assuming that all its viewers have seen Mix's preceding "Riders of the Purple Sage" (a logical assumption in 1925, since "Riders" was released only a couple of months earlier) and waiting no time on those who had the temerity to miss it. There is a flashback to the climax of "Riders", but otherwise there is little attempt to explain who is who - although curiously the first third of the film is rather protracted, and the basic story doesn't get under way until the mid-way point.

-OVER-
The story, perhaps due to its Grey origins, is much stronger than usual with Mix. There's less of the circus approach to the action, and for once the bad guys get killed off - frequently, seriously, and with no tears shed. While "Riders of the Purple Sage" was something of a misfire Mix, too close to the spirit of William S. Hart for Mix to seem thoroughly at home, "The Rainbow Trail" works much better, perhaps because the story is stronger on its own and doesn't even rely on traditional western trappings, though permitting plenty of logical opportunities for scraping and stunting. Grey, like Edgar Rice Burroughs, often laced his stories with elements of sex, and while those elements wouldn't be emphasised in a Mix adaptation, they're there, and give the story an extra edge. I never could quite buy the "geography" of "Riders of the Purple Sage", in which a single avalanche trapped hero and heroine permanently in a huge valley with no other exit - but the locations chosen here, and Dan Clark's as always excellent photography of them, make that earlier premise a little more plausible. Mix appears as Lassiter in the flashbacks, and in earlier scenes (bearded), but in the later scenes where the two Mixes would have to appear side by side, Lassiter's role is taken over by another actor (Doc Roberts), the beard making the transfer easy and not too obvious. With its good story, rugged action, beautiful locations and the relative novelty of snowscapes in the latter portions of the story, "The Rainbow Trail" is quite one of the better Mixes, if not one of the most typical. Incidentally, we ran the excellent sound remake (with George O'Brien) a few seasons back.

--- FIVE MINUTE INTERMISSION ---

THE LIGHTHOUSE BY THE SEA (Warner Brothers, 1924) Directed by Malcolm St. Clair
 Scenario by Darryl F. Zanuck from an original story by Owen Davis; photographed by Lyman Groening; edited by Howard Bretherton; 60 mins.


One of the chief delights of the old Rin Tin Tin films is that despite being designed for a set market, and of course retaining certain trademarks and characteristics, they were not by any means formula pictures. "Lighthouse by the Sea" has as one of its major points of interest the fact that it is an early feature directed by Malcolm St. Clair, ex-Keystone Cop and slapstick director, in a transition stage before he hit his stride at Paramount the year later as a director of such delightful sophisticated comedies as "Are Parents People?" and "The Grand Duchess and the Butler." St. Clair was noted for his gentle charm and wit, and his ability to tell fairly talkative stories in essentially visual terms, and although those qualities don't get too much of a chance to shine in a melodrama of Coast Guards vs. Rum Runners, he does produce some rather unexpectedly lovely images. The shots of the young lovers, silhouetted by the shore, or the beautifully composed scenes of the heroine walking to a waterfront saloon with the raging seas behind her, give some indication of the "extras" that St. Clair injected into his work.

As a Rin Tin Tin vehicle, the film is a little different from most in that one could delete him from the script and still have a plot left. But if Rinty is incidental to the plot itself, he certainly takes a major part in its execution. A Red Cross veteran up against rum runners, taking time out to save a blind man from crashing over the cliffs (a beautifully done sequence, if a somewhat illogical one) and finally saving the day by turning on the lighthouse beam, Rinty has a field day. How 1924 audiences must have cheered when Rinty puts the villain's savage bulldog, the Yukon Killer, to inglorious flight! If Rinty has fewer dramatic opportunities in this than in "The Night Cry" (shown earlier), he more than makes up for it with his energy, and the delightful way he has of running into a situation and sizing it up carefully before deciding on the right course of action. Incidentally, Darryl F. Zanuck wrote five of the Rin Tin Tin scripts, including this one, and apparently played Rinty's role in the script conferences, barking and woofing to explain Rinty's part in all the action. Ironically, Mal St. Clair's last days as a director were spent under Zanuck at 20th Century Fox in the early to mid-40's, turning out "50s comedies.

The print of "Lighthouse By The Sea" is a toned original, but in rather brittle shape, so while we don't anticipate trouble, we ask your indulgence should there be an occasional break. The other two prints are in fine physical condition, though "Der Teufelsreporter", being taken from the only known surviving 35mm copy in Europe, does exhibit some of the ravages of time in places.

Program Ends approx. 10:50. William K. Everson

Re next week's program: GRAND CANARY and NICHOLAS NICKLEBY: I will be out of town next weekend, so please note that program will start promptly at 7:45 without introduction. Program notes will be available as usual. A reminder that our last program on April 30 contains an unsubtitled French film, MACO L'ÉVEUF DU JEU. It is very easy to follow once one knows the basic relationships of the characters. A synopsis will be provided, and you might allow yourself extra time to read it prior to the show. (Late arrivals can still read it prior to screening, during the intermission).